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Essays on Syriac Theology & Spirituality

The role of Women
In the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch

by

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ARCHDIOCESE OF THE SYRIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH FOR THE EASTERN UNITED STATES
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ܠܫܘܒܚܗ ܕܐܠܗܐ

It is our hope that this series of articles will be of help to the Sunday School teachers of our beloved Archdiocese as they prepare their weekly lessons. We also trust that these booklets will provide adult religious education for individuals who yearn to know the faith of their Church and who constantly search for the meaning of God's word in their lives. May this work be for the glory of God's Name and the growth of His Holy Church.

Mor Cyril Aphrem Karim
Archbishop

The Role of Women
in the Syriac Orthodox Church or Antioch

A Speech delivered by His Holiness Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I Iwas at St. Ephrem Monastery in Sydnaya at the conclusion of the meeting of Orthodox women held in Damascus fromOctober 4-10, 1996 under the theme of Discerning the Signs of the Time and published in the Patriarchal Magazine, Nos. 157, 158, 159 of September, October and November1996.

Tackling such a topic actually stems from the fact that our Syriac Orthodox Church is a deeply rooted traditional apostolic church. In our presentation, we shall depend upon the Holy Scripture and the tradition of the Church, namely the teachings of the Apostles which have not been recorded in the Scriptures. We also shall depend on the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils and general and local synods, as well as on liturgical practices and the teachings of our Holy Church Fathers, which have all been passed down to us from our predecessors.

Depending on the Holy Bible, the Syrian Orthodox Church considers women equal to men in rights and duties. According to the Holy Scriptures, God created man in His image; "in the image of God created him; male and female He created them." Consequently, men and women are equal before God because God's ideal plan for marriage is one man for one woman and one woman for one man. In reference to their union in matrimony, the Holy Scripture says: "And they shall be one flesh (Gen. 2: 24, Mt.19: 5, Mk 10:8, and Eph.5: 31)." This is Adam, the first man from whom God took a rib and created Eve to be a helper for him. "And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man; (Gen. 2: 23)." They were both created in the image and likeness of God; the image of God which is the soul God gave to man when he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living soul. Hence, the living soul gave Adam life through union with the dust.

The image of God in man is also the image of mind and conscience, the power of creativity and dominance over other creatures. God endowed man with this power when He created him as holy, granting him dominance over the living creatures. Man was one, "male and female He created them" and dominance was granted to both of them, but when they both sinned they lost the grace of holiness. Jesus Christ,

however, redeemed us by His atoning death, restoring the image of holiness equally to both men and women. God Almighty spoke equally of men and women in the Old Testament, saying in the fifth Commandment: "Honor thy father and thy mother" (Ex. 20: 12) and in the Book of Proverbs, Solomon said: "My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother: Bind them continually upon thy heart, and tie them about thy neck. When thou goes, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou wakest, it shall talk with thee" (Prov. 6: 20)."

It is the Hebrew Fathers who distorted the concept of God's Commandments by their teachings which were so alien to the divine law. The Lord Jesus addressed Jews in this context, saying unto them: "Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? For God commanded, saying, "Honor thy Father and Mother: and He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, whosoever shall say to his father or his mother. It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; And honor not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition." (Mt.15: 3-6)."

THE VIRGIN MARY, THE NEW EVE

Indeed, our Lord Jesus Christ held women in high esteem in the person of the Virgin Mary, for He chose her to be His Mother because of her chastity and godliness so that she deserved that the Holy Spirit descend on her, purify her, absolve her from sin and sanctify her. Through the descent of the Holy Spirit, she conceived in her womb the Divine Fire, thus giving birth to the Divine Son, the Lord Incarnate. We call her Theotokos *(Yoldath Aloho)*, which means the Mother of God who gave birth to God Incarnate.

Although the Virgin Mary restored the early status of Eve, which she had lost after her fall, she never obtained the grace of priesthood.She ranked, however, high above prophets, clergy, martyrs, confessors, apostles and evangelists; for she was the one who informed the Apostles of what had happened to her since Gabriel's annunciation of the divine conception. The Virgin Mary was the first to evangelize the Good News of Christ and to believe in His divine power. We consider

her to be above the prophets. She prophesied about herself, saying: "From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is His Name. And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation (Lk. 1: 48-50)."

Jesus Christ honored his mother, the Virgin Mary while He was a child, and took care of her, providing for her sustenance in His adulthood after the death of Joseph who was betrothed to her. He also honored women in general, having sympathized with the sinful Samaritan woman who was demeaned by her people. Jesus talked to her when Hebrew rabbis abstained from talking to a woman in the street, albeit she was next of kin to them. The Lord Jesus sympathized also with the sinful woman whom the Pharisees wanted to stone to death and He absolved her. Jesus Christ did this at a time Jews looked down upon women. When we read about the miracle of feeding five thousand men with five loaves of bread and two fish, recorded by Apostle Matthew in the Holy Gospel, saying: "And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, beside women and children (Mt. 14: 21)," we do gather from the terminology used among Jews at that time that it was man who was important, whereas women and children were equally demeaned in status.

WOMEN AND THE JESUS

The Lord Jesus, however, showed His divine care for women. Some women walked with Him, serving Him and His disciples. Jesus was the friend of Martha and Mary, and their brother Lazarus (John 11: 5). It is noteworthy to mention here that women were loyal to Jesus Christ. They followed Him on His way to Golgotha. They bewailed and lamented Him.They grieved when they beheld Him crucified, suffering and in agony. They heard Him commend His mother, the Virgin Mary, to the care of His beloved disciple, thus teaching every human being to honor their mothers and take care of them. Women also followed Him to the new sepulcher where His Holy body was buried. They were the first to come early to the grave to embalm His Body. They were the first to see Him after the resurrection, and the first to profess his resurrection and proclaim it.

WOMEN AND THE APOSTLES

Women helped the Apostles and Evangelists in preaching the Good Tidings. And in the Acts of the Apostles, we read about the four daughters of Philip who were virgins and who did prophesy (Acts. 21: 9). Philip, the Evangelist was one of the seven deacons. We also read Apostle Paul's denouncement of the thoughts of those who protested against his accompanying a woman on his evangelical tours, saying: "Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas (I Cor. 9: 5)?"

Furthermore, women play a significant role in the establishment of a family and in taking care of it, raising children and bringing them up. In relevance to this, the Apostle Paul says: "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing (I Tim. 2:15)." By giving birth, he means both physical birth and the spiritual one from above. We can also see that this woman, who was ready to give a spiritual birth from above, was herself born from heaven. God Almighty created man as male and female, and made them equal in rights and duties, but He also recreated them anew from above at the time of redemption when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples at Pentecost in the Upper Room where there were 120 men and women. When Luke recorded this incident, he counted them all and not only men; therefore, he did not say apart from women when the Holy Spirit rested on all, on the Apostles, the disciples and on women simultaneously. The Virgin Mary, the Mother of God Incarnate, was in the lead among women who were there and they all, male and female, equally obtained the gifts of the sublime Holy Spirit.

WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Prior to the descent of the Holy Spirit, women were participating in the prayer with men in the Upper Room. They were all waiting expectantly for the coming of power from without, and the Holy Spirit rested upon women as He did upon the Apostles and all the disciples with no discrimination whatsoever between men and women. The Evangelist Luke describes this divine incident in the Acts of the Apostles, saying: "the number of names together were about a hundred and twenty, And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost (Acts 1:15 and 2:1-4)." The Holy Spirit prepared them all for proclaiming the

Good News of the Gospel to the world. He preserved them from erring, reminding them of all that had been said by the Lord Jesus, so they adhered to His heavenly teachings and preached them to the world.

At this point we are undoubtedly bound to mention women believers who used to serve in the palaces of kings, great men, chiefs and noblemen; and to preach the Holy Gospel in word and in deed, especially through raising children and living a life of righteousness. Through these women, the Holy Gospel spread powerfully and gradually the way leaven produces fermentation in dough.

So peacefully, the Holy Gospel broke into strongholds of misleading and misled paganism and those of Judaism which perverted God's laws. Hence multitudes of both faiths believed in the Holy Gospel during the very early days of Christianity.

We, as a church, who have adhered to the Holy Gospel and the ecclesiastic and apostolic tradition, shall have to admit that God has bequeathed on some women the gifts of sublime spiritual leadership, which were clearly manifested in their lives throughout the ages.

It goes without saying that the history of the Syriac Orthodox Church abounds with the lives of such women. In the Syriac Church women enjoy great dignity due to the active role they have played in their service of the Church.

Helen, the Christian queen, who was the daughter of a Syriac priest, who lived near Edessa and brought up her son Constantine in a righteous way, vowed that if her son converted to Christianity, she would go to Jerusalem in search of the wood of the Cross. A vow she certainly kept.

EMPRESS THEODORA

It is mandatory that we mention Empress Theodora, the woman who symbolizes the glory of the Syriac Church and who rules over our hearts, coming second to the Virgin Mary in status, dignity and honor. She was the wife of Emperor Justinian in the sixth century AD. This miraculous woman was the daughter of a Syriac priest of Mabbug in Syria.

We respect and honor Empress Theodora and bless her because she offered comfort to her spiritual fathers, the highly esteemed pontiffs of

the Church, whom she highly respected and served at difficult and crucial times when the Byzantine Government used to persecute, displace, exile and kill them. The toll of this persecution was thousands of martyrs. Those who survived persecutions went through agonies and Theodora used to comfort and protect them. However, she could never bring this persecution, launched against them by Byzantium, to an end without paying a dear price.

It was Theodora who was behind sending a mission to illuminate Ethiopia with the light of the Holy Gospel. And we shall never forget the nuns who took vows of celibacy, chastity, voluntary poverty and obedience, dedicating themselves to the service of the Holy Gospel throughout the ages.

This is what we gather from the patrimony of our Fathers, their traditions and honorable history. Indeed, the aforementioned women are not the only ones in the history of our Syriac Orthodox Church. So many were the women who were well known for their wisdom, scrutiny and courage in professing their faith. Many of them obtained the laurels of martyrdom for the sake of Christ, and many others underwent persecutions and agonies and were listed among the confessors. Many women had an inborn wit like the Edessan woman whom St. Ephrem met along the banks of the Disan River in Edessa. The story goes that this woman kept glancing at him so he became angry and rebuked her, saying: "Woman, keep your eyes downward and look at the ground." To which she answered: "I am entitled to look at you, oh man, because I was taken from you and you should look down to the earth as it was from earth you were created." St. Ephrem admired this woman's wisdom and said: "If this is the wisdom of the women of Edessa, what kind of wisdom would that of men be? [1]

WOMEN AND SAINT EPHREM

In Edessa, where St. Ephrem came to settle after leaving Nisibis in 363 upon its occupation by the Persians, he sometimes lived an ascetic life on the Holy Mount of Edessa and other times taught in its famous school.He was interested in liturgical life, to which he introduced the special melodies of his rhymed hymns. He also started a church choir, including young Edessan girls to sing his meloldies and other spiritual poems and beautiful hymns which he adapted to teach the doctrines and faith of orthodoxy.

It is clear that St. Ephrem`s establishment of a choir of young virgins exalted the status of women and has practically proved that when St. Paul wrote in his First Epistle to the Corinthians (14:34)"Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak", he did so solely as a temporary organizational meassure, not a doctrine of faith that should never be amended or changed, in order to prevent talkative womenfrom prattling at a time others wished to pray piously before the Divine Glory.

St. Ephrem is doubtlessly considered a pioneer in having started a choir in Christianity. He attested that women like men have an equal right to praise God in public prayer. St. Paul, however, spoke of men and women as equals in the self-same Epistle to the Corinthians, saying: "Nevertheless, neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord (I Cor. 11: 11)."

The influence of St.Ephrem is clear in his education of women in Edessa by helping them understand the teachings of the of the Holy Gospel, adhere to Christian doctrine and endure persecution courageously for the sake of faith.

All this is manifested in the incident of the woman from Edessa during the persecution launched by Wallis the Arian at the end of the fourth century, precisely in the year 373. Wallis had appointed an Arian bishop in Edessa, but this prelate was rejected by the faithful who consequently began to pray outside the city. One early Sunday morning all the faithful flocked to the outskirts of the city where soldiers started arresting them and throwing them into prisons. The governor of the city met one of the faithful while she was running to join the others, carrying her newborn baby. The governor stood in her way and stopped her, reminding her of the authorities'orders and the severe punishment awaiting whoever might violate these orders. She expressed her willingness to endure agony for the sake of adhering to the Christian doctrine of faith. He went on and asked her: "We have come to know that you have left the door of your house wide open and you are running so fast carrying your newborn too. Why have you done this?" To which she answered: "As for the house, I am sure I am not returning to it. Concerning my newborn, it is because of my great love for him that I want him to share with me the honor of martyrdom and to be joyfully with me in paradise, thus saving him from the condemnation

which is the result of your perversity.

We can therefore gather that a faithful woman is worth of every honor bestowed upon her. Our Syrian Church is fully aware of women's credits and virtues and does highly acknowledge their true worth and dignity.

SYRIAC WOMAN, A DEACONESS AND A PRESBYTERA

One of the practices inherited from our Fathers is the restriction of women from entering the sanctuary. Even baby girls are not allowed to enter the sanctuary after having been blessed by the sacrament of Holy Baptism. A baby girl is not allowed to be carried in a procession inside the sanctuary as is a little boy. One of the reasons behind this practice might be the tendency to preserve the good reputation of Christianity which was accused duringthe early days of its history of being an erotic religion.

Another reason for such a practice might be the fear of falling in sin as a result of having the two sexes within the sanctuary, especially as pagan priestesses used to sell their bodies with the aim of raising money for their pagan temple.

Allocation of two separate places in the church for men and women, separated by a wooden partition, was an established practice inherited from church tradition. Reference to this practice can be inferred from one of the Homelies of John Chrysostom (+407). The impact of this practice was apparent in some of our ancient churches.

St. Jacob of Sarug (+421), the saintly scholar of our Church, justifies the non-admittance of women to the sanctuary in one of his verses (memres) in which he says through the mouth of Adam in teaching his children: [2]"I would not send weeded wheat [3]as an offering to the Lord with the hands of Eve lest she might offer it to her advisor (Satan); and I shall never give sacrifice to the Lord because I am not pure; for never shall the expelled priest have the right to do that. The foot that headed willingly towards the tree of life shall have no right to tread the site dedicated to pontiffs (and priests), and the hand that picked the forbidden fruit in Eden shall have no right to flutter over the Divine Eucharist."

Even though the Church has prevented women from entering the

sanctuary, it has allowed the wife of the priest, who was consecrated as a presbytera (*Qashishto*), and the widow, who was consecrated as a deaconess, to enter the sanctuary occasionally in the event of the absence of a priest or a deacon or any male

It is useful as well to mention here that we, Syrians, have a rite for the consecration of presbyteras and another for the consecration of deaconesses. In his work, Nomocanon, the great scholar Mar Gregorios Abi Alfàraj Al Malati, Catholicos of the East, better known as Bar Hebraeus (+1286) (Sec. 7, Chap. 7), states that deaconesses were usually chosen from among pious widows who had certain qualifications such as having been married only once, and having been committed to the service of the church after becoming widows, fasting and praying and having good reputation among both family and outsiders.

THE MINISTRY OF THE DEACANESS

After being consecrated, the ministry of the deaconess is limited to helping the priest and deacon outside the sanctuary in the service of baptizing women and mature girls and anointing them with holey chrism. This ministry also includes visiting sick female faithful specially in homes inhabited soley by women.In this case the bishop does not send a deacon to visit them lest any doubts might arise among the unbelievers, but rather a deaconess to take care of the female faithful.

In the event a widow consecrated as a deaconess remarries, she shall be excommunicated together with the one who marries her. Certain canon laws limit the age of the widow candidate to be consecrated as a deaconess to forty years; whereas other canons do not recommend the consecration of a deaconess before the age of sixty.

St. Severios the Great (+538) states that in the sixth century the ordination of abbesses as deaconesses was in practice in the Orient (under the jurisdiction of the Antiochean See). In the event of the unavailability of a priest or a deacon, each one of those consecrated was entitled to distribute Holy Communion to the sisters who were under their authority. They do not, however, do this service in the case of the presence of either one. The deaconess wears a stole (harrar) hanging down from the shoulder in the manner of an archdeacon.

In the event of the unavailability of a priest or a deacon in the convent, a deaconess is entitled to enter the sanctuary (*Beth Qudsheh*), provided that she is not having her menstrual period and that she is only with her sisterswhere she may give them the Communion. She may not do so to males, even to little boys who are five years of age or older.

When a consecrated deaconess burns incense, she may not recite the special prayer usually recited by the priest, but inwardly recites the prayer of repentance.

She may, after obtaining permission from the bishop, mix wine and water in the chalice; and in the event of her illness, she may allow one of the sisters to enter the sanctuary in order to clean it and light the sanctuary candles.

A deaconess shall never be blamed if she reads the Holy Scriptures, even the Holy Gospel, in a public gathering of sisters on holy days

According to the teachings of Jacob of Edessa (+708), " The deaconess may never enter the sanctuary except to clean it or light candles. In the event of unavailability of a priest or a deacon in the convent, she may take the Communion, which is usually placed in (*Beth Qurbono*), a kind of a hole usually dug in the eastern wall behind the altar. She may not, however, come close to the altar. She may also give Communion to the sisters and only to little boys below the age of five. She may help the priest in the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism of mature women by anointing them with holy chism and may visit sick women."

It was the wife of the priest who was called a presbytera, following her consecration as such. She was also called a daughter of the covenant. The rite of her consecration is usually carried out by the bishop at the end of the Holy Litergy. During the service, the wife of the priest kneels down, bowing before the sanctuary while the bishop makes intercessions to God to exhort the faithful, to become like the five wise virgins who took their lamps filled with the oil of good deeds of vigilance and watch, while waiting for the second coming of the Heavenly Groom in order to go with Him to the joyous wedding and to glorify Him.

CONSECRATION OF THE DEACONESS

During the rite of consecration, prayers and petitions are said for both

the repentance of the one called upon for this ministry, as well as for herendowment with wisdom.

Prayers center upon the parable of the virgins (Mt. 25: 1-13), as well asthe parable of the invitation to the banquet, obliging people to enter the house of the host and share in the meal (Mt. 22: 1-14).The bishop then commands that the curtain be drawn to hide the one to be consecrated. Meanwhile, she takes off her bracelets and her outer garments and wears a wide blue skirt, hanging down from the waist to the toes, putting on a black girdle. She is also dressed in a black or blue coat hanging over her shoulders. Afterwards, the bishop holds a black scarf upon which he makes a triple sign of the cross, tightly on her head like a cap while reciting the following prayer:"May the Lord protect you and shield you with His divine right hand, saving you from the temptations of the soul and body so you may obtain His bliss for ever Amen."

Later someone reads a chapter from the Book of Acts about Peter restoring life to Tabitha (Act 9: 36-42), and a selection from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians (3: 12-17) commencing with:"Put on therefore, as the elect of God, and beloved, bowls of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long suffering, forbearing one another, and forgiving one another as Christ forgave you."

Then the bishop reads Chapter ten of the Gospel of Luke, starting from verse 38 up to 42 about Martha and Mary where the Lord says to Martha:"Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful; and Mary has chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her (Lk. 10: 41– 42)."

At this point, the bishop makes the sign of the cross on her forehead three times, saying: "(Name of consecrated) shall be sealed, stamped and perfected, that is consecrated as an actual presbytera for the service of the children of the Holy Church. Afterwards, the archdeacon says in a loud voice: (Barekhmore) which means "Bless, O Lord" to which the bishop adds, saying: "In the Name of the Father +", and the deacon responds, saying: "Amen." The bishop continues, saying: "and of the Son +" to which the deacon responds, saying: "Amen." Then the bishop says: "and of the Holy Spirit forever." The deacon then responds, saying: "Amen."

Afterwards, the bishop reads a silent prayer of thanksgiving and then recites a prayer for the consecrated presbytera publicly, followed by the prayer of "Oh Lord, have mercy on us" and the Lord's Prayer.

We gather from the procedures of the rite of consecration, canon laws and the powers granted to the one to be consecrated as a presbytera that the consecration of a presbytera is neither an ordination nor an office but a mere consecration appointment and dedication.

We do not know for certain the date of the discontinuance of this rite of consecration. Although we now call the wife of every priest(Bath Qiomo), meaning a daughter of the covenant, the same name given soley to the consecrated individual.

It is noteworthy to mention here that nowadays the wife of the priest, though not consecrated, can help her husband with the baptism of adult females if any.

The consecration of deaconesses has been recently restored and we have started consecrating some of them as choirgirls, calling them deaconesses.

THE DEACONESSES TODAY

The name of deaconess given to a choirgirl is a nominal one. During the rite of consecration, the bishop says that(name of person)is being consecrated as a deaconess in the choir. This deaconess shall not be subject to the laws that used to bind the deaconesses in the past. Neither shall she be entitled to the same rights, privileges or duties the deaconess used to previously enjoy. She is just a singer in the church. Most often she serves in religious education centers. Just like other women, she may get married, yet remain consecrated as a deaconess, serving as a singer in the choir, a teacher or a Sunday school advisor. This might be a step forward towards resumption of consecrating widows as deaconesses in the church as previously practised.

There is a possibility of having a second thought about church tradition in relation to the rights and duties of those called deaconesses or presbyterae in terms of the services they offer to women and little children, and in relation to cleaning the sanctuary and lighting candles. In this age, those activities that might take place in the church when needed may add to the enrichment of souls and to the progress and

prosperity of the Church.

Definitely, ordination of presbyteraes, having the power of a clergy to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, as practised by some traditional non-apostolic churches, would never be permitted in our apostolic Syrian Orthodox Church. This is due to the fact that such an act is never based on the Scriptures. For when the Lord Jesus chose twelve apostles and seventy missionaries, He never selected any of those women who were serving Him. Likewise, a presbytera in our Church has never been ordained in the office of a clergy who has the power to absolve from sin and celebrate the Bloodless Holy Eucharist and other sacraments of the Church.

Syriac women today occupy high positions in all domains, social, cultural and religious.

Women have become physicians, lawyers, judges, engineers, teachers and members of Parliament, and in the Church Council of Trustees as well as being members in charitable societies. They are choir singers and Sunday school teachers. In all these endeavors, women are equal to men in rights, duties and dignity.

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1 -Biography of St.Ephrem, the Syrian by author.Damascus, 1984.pp.

2- ܠܐ ܡܥܒܪ ܐܢܐ ܟܠܝܠܐ ܠܢܫ̈ܐ ܠܒܢ̈ܬ ܚܘܐ: ܘܠܐ ܡܫܠܛ ܠܗ ܙܟܪ ܒܪ ܡܫܟܢܐ ܐܝܟ ܕܡܕܒܪ.
ܘܠܐ ܡܩܪܒ ܐܢܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܠܢܫ̈ܐ ܕܠܗ ܕܝܠܐ ܐܢܐ: ܘܠܐ ܡܫܩܪ ܠܗ ܠܡܫܡܫܬܐ ܠܡܕܒܚܐ ܕܕܝܠܐ ܡܩܪܒ.

3- (*Bleelo*),which means weeded wheat connoting the Holy Eucharist (consecrated bread) is misspelt in Syriac as (*Kleelo*).

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